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SUBJECT: SETTING THE STAGE FOR YEMEN,S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

REF: SANAA 706

1. (U) Summary: The April 27 parliamentary elections should be the most competitive elections ever in Yemen. This third parliamentary election in Yemen's emerging democracy presents a challenge and an opportunity for Yemen to move forward. The potential for violence threatens to mar what observers believe will be a mostly free and fair election (ref). Many issues will affect the election's outcome, including opposition party coordination or lack thereof, poor candidate selection, campaign issues, few women candidates and effective election observation. End Summary.

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Most Competitive Elections Ever,  
Higher Potential for Violence  
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2. (U) Unlike in past elections, little evidence of "backroom" coordination between the GPC and Islah parties has emerged. In 1997, the parties negotiated to create "safe" constituencies for each other, both because they were running in an informal coalition and because they wished to avoid violent clashes in high-tension areas. The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), former ruling party of pre-unification People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, is running in this election, another major difference from 1997 when they boycotted. These two factors mean that the 2003 elections should be the most competitive in Yemen ever. An informal count by knowledgeable observers indicates that approximately 120 of 301 constituencies should be highly competitive "hot" races, primarily in Sanaa city and the Aden, Taiz and Hadramaut governorates.

3. (U) The increased competition and resultant tension causes many observers to fear increased violence during this election period. Past elections have seen flare-ups of violence in random constituencies between political parties and between tribes. In some instances, this violence was the result of warring tribes using the elections as "an excuse" to continue fighting that has gone on for decades. In other instances, the fighting has flared up because of disputes between partisans. The ROYG, political parties and NGOs have made significant efforts in recent months to discuss how to combat the possibility of violence, including the signing by 22 political parties of a Code of Conduct on April 8 (septel). Observers fear, however, that these efforts may not be entirely effective as election day approaches even with an increased security presence throughout Yemen.

4. (U) Political observers are finding that the heavy competition makes predictions of election results difficult. A vast majority believe that the GPC will retain its majority with little difficulty, but many also see the likelihood of the Islah party significantly increasing its number of seats.

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Opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)  
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5. (U) The Islah party, YSP and most small opposition parties comprise the JMP, which was formed in early 2002 to more effectively challenge the ruling GPC. At several points in the last several months, JMP cohesion was threatened. For example, the assassination of YSP leader Jarallah Omar at the Islah party conference December 28, 2002 could have caused the JMP to break up. However, in a development that surprised many observers, the JMP has managed to remain largely coordinated.

6. (U) The JMP failed to negotiate which party,s candidates would run in which areas in all constituencies. Among the largest parties, the YSP gave way to Islah candidates in 130 constituencies while Islah gave way to YSP candidates in 30 constituencies. Negotiations with the smaller parties in the coalition did not result in many agreements. A majority of the JMP competitive constituencies are located in Aden, Hadramaut and Sanaa, areas where the YSP and Islah both believed themselves well able to win.

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Sheikh al-Ahmar -- "Joint" GPC-Islah Candidate  
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17. (U) Leader of the Islah party and recent Speaker of Parliament Sheikh al-Ahmar will run unofficially as a "joint" candidate for the GPC and Islah. Negotiations between the GPC and Islah to orchestrate a switch in high positions between al-Ahmar and Shura Council Chairman Abdul Ghani failed. These negotiations were fueled by the realization that if the GPC retained its majority, it would not make sense to re-elect an Islahi because the two parties no longer form an informal governing coalition. At the same time, al-Ahmar's profile and power necessitated a high position in the complicated balancing act that is Yemeni politics. It appears that the ROYG and the GPC calculated that, in the absence of an agreement to switch, it was prudent to make the re-election of al-Ahmar politically feasible by announcing him as being supported by both parties. Al-Ahmar is expected to win because the same token opposition candidate that runs against him regularly will be his only competition, setting the stage for al-Ahmar's likely re-election as Speaker of Parliament.

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Candidate Choices  
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18. (U) Approximately 1,500 candidates are running in the 301 constituencies, including political party and independent candidates. This number is significantly lower from past elections. Some observers have blamed the war in Iraq for the decrease, alleging that it reduced the number of candidates, lowered citizen interest and created opportunities for opposition parties to gain votes through anti-U.S./ROYG campaigning. However, the decrease is more likely a result of opposition parties coordinating candidates and complicated measures by which independent candidates can register that decreased their number significantly.

19. (U) Political observers note that decentralization in candidate nomination by the GPC and Islah parties caused deterioration in "candidate quality" in some cases and lowered the chances for women being nominated. Many candidates are believed to be illiterate and were nominated out of local or tribal power centers rather than from among the educated.

110. (U) Presidential son Ahmed Saleh, head of the Yemeni Special Forces, did not run again. A well-traveled joke from the last parliament was that its numbers of Members were "300 Ahmed," an indication of what many thought of his effectiveness as a Member. In his constituency, the former Mayor of Sanaa is the GPC candidate, someone that many believe corrupt.

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Active Campaign; Issues  
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111. (U) Halfway through the 19-day official campaign period, the election campaign is in full swing. Campaign posters are everywhere, political party newspapers publish almost daily and coverage on television and in newspapers is widespread. Political party platforms are published in their entirety in official and opposition papers alike. Concerns that the war in Iraq would greatly affect the election -- including rumors for several months that the elections would be postponed should a war begin -- have dissipated with the fall of Saddam's regime.

112. (U) Campaign issues vary, with the most prominent being the economy, law and order, and corruption. In many cases, parties seem to run less on specific issues than on candidate or leadership personalities and whether they are government or opposition. The issues of U.S.-ROYG counterterrorism cooperation and, in relation, the war in Iraq, do not appear to be the huge issues that the ROYG and ruling GPC feared. Nevertheless, political observers believe that these issues, with an attendant flavor of an "American fight against Islam," will increase the Islah party vote.

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Few Women Candidates  
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113. (U) In what many consider the biggest disappointment of the run-up to the election, only 11 women are running for election. They represent four political parties, including GPC and YSP, and include five independents. Not only has Yemen allowed universal suffrage since 1993 (the first on the Arabian Peninsula), but both parliaments in 1993 and 1997 had women Members. Some observers and political parties fear that no women will be elected this time and Yemen will backslide in its women's representation.

114. (U) Several domestic and international NGOs and some political parties had advocated for either a formal or informal "set-aside" for women candidates to ensure at least 10 percent representation. Ideas included parties informally

agreeing to run only women in 30 selected constituencies and a formal last-minute change in the election law to mandate "women,s constituencies." Several problems caused the low number of women candidates, including a decision by the Islah that they would lose a large part of their base should they run women, decentralization in candidate selection that left central party bodies without the ability to place women candidates, increased competition that caused parties to be reluctant to run women they thought might be weaker candidates than men and a traditional male-dominated society. A formal resolution in the election law was not feasible before the election, and many are discussing the possibility of raising the issue after the election.

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Election Observation  
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15. (U) The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is fielding the only official international observation delegation. 30 delegates from 10 countries, including several in the Middle East, will observe. More than 30,000 domestic election observers are registered as well, including between 6-10,000 NDI-trained observers. The Embassy plans to informally observe the elections. Details on observation septel.  
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